Al Jennings Finds New York Bad Men a Desperate Lot

Man Who Held Up Former Western Bandit Declared to Have Been Impelled by Injustice

AL JENNINGS — chronologically lawyer, politician, train robber, bank robber, ex-convict, preacher, author and moving picture actor and producer—was held up at the muzzle of an automatic pistol in a New York street a few nights ago. The experience was new to the ex-bad man, who was unconditionally pardoned by President Roosevelt and has gone straight ever since. Jennings has got something to say about the experience of being at the business end of the pistol instead of behind it, and it is interesting, as he writes it exclusively for this paper.

By Al Jennings

THERE used to be a certain exhilaration about shooting all the window glass out of railway train windows, making the passengers get down and shell out and watching them jump around in obedience to our rough commands in the old train robbing days, so I thought I knew the "feel" of the young New York City bandit who poked an ugly automatic in my ribs a few nights ago and relieved me of my wallet.

Folks, I've been thinking about that hold-up right here in America's greatest city. It wasn't because I was Al Jennings, ex-train robber and bank robber, or any stroke of coincidence that I was the victim of that hold-up. It was me because I was the first man to pass along. It might have been you. But it was a unique experience for me.

Staged Roughness

I've given the command "Up with your hands!" hundreds of times in the old days without any intention ever of shooting. One is gruff in the robbing game to terrorize, and it has the desired effect. I put myself in this young fellow's place when he almost hissed through his teeth, "Up with 'em!" and I put them up, but I couldn't feel terrorized or afraid. I had a chance to study him. And I will say here and now that the man was not an ex-convict, a professional stick-up man or a bad man.

He was an ex-soldier, of Uncle Sam's army who had fought in France for his country. He wasn't making a profession of robbing as me and my gang did in the old days. There was no exhilaration in it for him. He had been driven to it.

As he stood with his .45-caliber automatic close to my side and commanded me to shell out I had a keen desire to know what he was doing it for. I noticed the knitted khaki sweater on his chest and became curious. I asked him first if he had ever "done time."

Prison a Possibility

"I haven't, but I may," he threw back at me.

And here is the significant part of what he said:

"I intend to make 'em pay for every scar I've got on my body."

"My God, boy, I'm Al Jennings, and I've done time, and for the last fifteen years I've been trying to keep men from doing time," I told him.

"Yes, I'm President Wilson," he said. "No more of this talk or I'll tear a hole through you."

He had a Colt's .45 automatic in his hand, and I know what a .45-caliber bullet can do. About that time he jabbed me pretty strong in the side with the muzzle. I've been shot five times, and I know the heavy detonation of a pistol of that size which comes so suddenly. I smelt powder right there and saw myself lying on a marble slab in some cold New York morgue. The idea wasn't pleasant, but for the life of me I couldn't get scared, and I had to keep the conversation going, even if he pulled the trigger. I laughed and it made him nervous and sore, but he let me go ahead.

"Son," I said, "if I really and truly had any opportunity I would take advantage of you and you wouldn't understand. You've got me pretty well covered, and I want to tell you just this: I feel so sincerely for the boys who've come home from France and have been forgotten that I don't blame you for holding people up. It's a damned shame, and"——

Talk Made Him Nervous

That was as far as I got, but I was talking fast and he was getting more nervous every word. He had already gone through me and taken my wallet.

"I don't know whether you're trying to 'kid' me or not," he came back at me. "I guess you'd better move on."

That was the last I saw of that New York hold-up ex-service man, and I've been thinking it all over since.

The $82 that he took along in my wallet I didn't mind losing so much, but my full and unconditional pardon signed by Theodore Roosevelt was in that wallet. I know I can get another pardon paper, but I cannot have the name of Theodore Roosevelt on it.

Really, my love for that man for his kindness to me was something sacred. Of course, his signature on that pardon was the thing that I have often looked at, and it has always recalled his words to me: "I am going to give you a full and free pardon, because you have not lied to me, but I want you to be worthy of the confidence I have in you."

Before God, I have been worthy of the confidence of that great American, and I always will be. I've been honest for fifteen years, and I'm awfully lonesome.

If that man that held me up here in New York had received the same treatment on his return home from overseas that was so effulgently given to all of Uncle Sam's soldiers before they left, in my judgment he would never have been a hold-up man.

The Western Bad Man

Out in the West, years ago, we had the rough lives that gave us contempt for danger and death, and those of us who went to the bad were hold-up men and robbers because we had no fear of anything on earth. We held up a train or robbed a bank with no thought of the battle which often followed, and we felt no advance horror of the possibility of a bullet tearing through us. Some of us were driven to banditry and others took up the "profession" through sheer cussedness.

Men never hold up fellow men at the point of a six-shooter or automatics through fear of personal injury or the might of the law. Something must take this out of them before they can become hold-up men.

Our young men of to-day have had the cowardice of honesty taken out of them by their experiences overseas. With death all around them over there they have come back unafraid to take a chance when circumstances drive them.

I am not afraid of injury or death. If I should chance to be standing at this moment on Forty-second Street and a New York street battle should begin, I'm sure I would stand and watch it for the old thrill it would bring back to me. I wouldn't think for a moment about being struck by a bullet. By the same token these ex-soldiers are not afraid. They've had it taken out of them. And now when they have come back into a land where for two years honesty — governmental or civil—has been at a premium; a country for the past two or three years at the mercy of profiteers; come back to be given a hearty welcome and thereafter to be shunned and forgotten, is it strange that an old train robber, bank robber and ex-convict can see their point of view?

AL JENNINGS, formerly a notorious Western bandit, who recently was held up in New York

I'll say with all conviction that unless the Harding Administration gives some serious thinking and action to civic conditions in this land and comes straight forward to rebuild the wreck created by the outgoing outfit there will be a shaking up in this country.

Misguided boys—of course they are the weaker ones—taken to Europe and taught contempt for death and brought back and deserted among conditions fostered by the most unpatriotic class on earth, the money grabbers, along with a laxity of brains on the part of Administration officials in Washington—can't you see why bread lines are long and park benches are filled and crime waves exist?

Let me tell you why I feel so strongly on this point. I am an ex-convict. I have said that I am lonesome in honesty.

Since I've been here in New York or, rather, since I was robbed on the street and a newspaper wrote something about it, I have been visited in my hotel by burglars and other criminals from Sing Sing.

Like the misguided boys who are broken by conditions and shunned, these ex-convicts want to be good. They've all heard of Al Jennings, ex-convict.

"You've made it a bit easier for all of us," they've told me, "by your career of honesty since you quit the 'pen,' and we want to quit like you did, but they won't let us."

I know how those men feel. They are hounded by society and so am I—I have been for fifteen years. As a lawyer before I turned bandit I was more dangerous to society than a bandit. I was a member of "decent" society, lobbying for whisky in Washington. It's the God's truth when I write it here that I was able to influence legislation—whisky legislation—for money, and I've "bought" representatives of the people cheaper than you can buy a pound of bacon right now.

In Spite of the Public

Since I came out of the penitentiary I have worked in every way to make men better. For fifteen years I've worked in the pulpit, in the public forum, in theaters, before civic clubs, trying to make people understand that a man, no matter what his past has been, can beat his way back to his former good standing in life in spite of the public, and that's the God's truth. I've striven in every way to make an honest living, and I have succeeded, but where I've made good many have failed. Why? Here is an incident:

My moving picture "The Girl in the Dugout," which depicts my past life, must go before boards of censorship in every city. The chief objection found by censors is that it might serve as a bad example to youths who would attempt to emulate my crime life. But that isn't always the real reason why there is objection to it. The picture really carrys its moral. The crimes of Al Jennings landed him in the penitentiary. Recently in Memphis there was a woman on the censorship board. The board passed adversely on the film without seeing it. The explanation came from the woman. She said:

"Mr. Jennings, we cannot afford to let you show your picture in Memphis, because it would set a bad example for our young men. They would want to follow you."

"But you haven't seen the film," I queried. "It is a lively drama, but it could not influence any one to follow a life of crime."

"It isn't your picture, Mr. Jennings," she said. "It is your own personality. You have been successful, even though you once led a life of crime. It is your own success that we are afraid of. Of course, we all feel very kindly toward you personally."

The Kindness That Kills

"Yes," I replied, "yours is the kindness that kills. Suppose I depended only on my picture for a living, and by your action I was cut off from an honest living, as thousands are. Wouldn't your action tend to drive me back to my former banditry, because, after all, I have to have some place to eat and sleep? Under present conditions, with a crime wave of profiteering in the land and eating running high, I almost have to go out and knock some other poor devil's block off to get a loaf of bread—but I'm not going to do it."

Let the incoming Administration curb profiteering in all the necessaries of life, let it treat the men who fought and bled for this country as human beings and there will be less crime.

Ex-convicts have their great struggle with society, but ex-soldiers, perhaps, have as great a claim to decent treatment.

Perhaps those who read this will remember reading of a robbery which occurred in Chicago a short time ago. Men drew up to a bank in motor trucks, one behind the other, and a skirmish line of young men advanced from the trucks on the bank. Others formed a rear-guard. It was a robbery carried out in absolute military fashion. The system and the contempt for the law was learned on the battlefields of France.

In my own career, common hold-ups were seldom done. Myself and my gang used to content ourselves with express cars and banks. Sometimes when we failed to get anything from the express car we would take up a collection from the passengers.

Since I left prison I've been a preacher. I'll say now that the passengers we used to line up outside the cars gave more freely than any congregation I've ever preached to.

I'm quite sure the man who held me up here in New York was ashamed to do it. I could sense it in his enforced tone of command that he felt new to the game and guilty. I think if he had known that his victim was Al Jennings he wouldn't have taken my money.

I'm equally sure that I'll hear from that boy some day and that he'll send me back the finest document that I ever hope to possess—my full and unconditional pardon signed by that great and fine American, Theodore Roosevelt.

Florida Everglades the Nation's Future Garden, Says Woman Scientist Who Has Explored Swamp

THE mental picture of the Florida Everglades as little more than a happy hunting ground for hungry alligators is all wrong.

Tourists who have plumbed every pleasure that the fashionable resorts provide, as well as future Presidents who have confined their cruising to houseboat navigation along the golfing waters, are probably unaware of a remarkable metamorphosis now going on in the wild and exotic interior — a change which actually means a sharp challenge to Cuba for the sugar supremacy of the world.

Miss Elizabeth F. Fisher, professor of geology and geography at Wellesley College, the first woman field geologist ever sent out by a company to locate wells in the oil regions, is of the opinion that a little more drainage and a little more improvement in marketing facilities will show the world something phenomenal in the way of speedy reclamation of a land once thought hopelessly lost.

Miss Fisher has just returned from a careful geographical survey extending from Fort Myers, on the west coast, to West Palm Beach. She traveled by automobile and boat to More Haven, on the shores of Lake Okeechobee, and thence by canal to the east. She has seen the Everglades, the land that has been drained, and the farmers at their work in the virgin soil. And as a geographer of long experience she believes firmly in the idea of Florida as a sugar state.

Sugar itself is not a new story to native-born Florida people. The cane was cultivated in northern parts of the state as long ago as 150 years. Florida planters are all alive to the situation which has grown out of the war-time shortage, and Northern capital has been quick to see the possibilities in the fact that well-drained soil will yield a profitable crop of a product which has never seen a Florida failure.

But there is something new in the vision of this woman explorer and scientist, who sees the country not in terms of 150 years ago, but with the eyes of geology, which look back through the thousands of centuries to the time when Florida rose from the sea. This peninsula, the last section of the continental shelf to climb above sea level, is one of the youngest parts of the whole country.

As the infant state of the union, the southern half of Florida is still struggling with the waters of the ocean, left in the hollow spaces and the low country to make the long-unsolved mystery of the Everglades. Planters and government experts may count the available acreage in the north of the state. Miss Fisher is counting the acres unborn.

MISS ELIZABETH F. FISHER, professor of geology and geography at Wellesley College, who explored the Everglades

"The future plantations of the Everglades," says Miss Fisher, "might come in time through a natural rising of the earth. But why wait for Nature? The answer today is more drainage, wider cultivation and better marketing conditions for the planters off the beaten track of existing transportation facilities.

"Our party saw the possibilities in this Southern soil at Lake Okeechobee, where the drainage canals have lowered the level of the lake by some four feet. This uncovered about 80,000 acres of the richest muck land one would care to see; land so rich that weeds were growing ten feet high. The lake is approximately twenty-seven miles wide, and with further drainage and further reclamation it is not unreasonable to suppose that we could add nearly a million acres to the arable land of the United States. And it has been estimated by experts who have given the matter careful research and special study that on a million acres of the best Florida lands there could be raised enough cane to produce all the sugar this country could use."

With a real Chestertonian touch Miss Fisher found in failure the greatest augur of success. This was the case of a farmer named Haskins, who lives at More Haven, on the shores of Okeechobee. This pioneer saw the possibilities of the virgin land, but made the mistake of planting cabbages. He got the cabbages all right, 80,000 of them, and most of them tipped the scales at three pounds or more. As cabbages they could have held their heads high in any market. But even at the low price of half a cent each Mr. Haskins couldn't sell them. The freight rates to the North were prohibitive. So he plowed his cabbages under the soil and started in anew.

Every one knows how the sandy soils near the sea in Florida yield their oranges and grapefruit. But the gardening possibilities of the muck land of the interior, in the Everglades, present a chapter of American enterprise which has yet to be written. Miss Fisher, as a member of the Wellesley College faculty, has only a scientific interest in this problem and is not press agenting for Southern land companies. Yet she says freely that the radishes she saw near Lake Okeechobee looked just as big as beets.

"There are many angles of this situation, from a scientific point of view, which have yet to be thrashed out," she says. "Conservation must take into account the cost of clearing away our nearest approach to a jungle, and must also consider the disposition to be made of the five or six hundred Seminole Indians who consider this country their own. Such, for example, was Billy Tucker, of Lakeport, a Seminole who accompanied our party and tried in vain to grasp the significance of our survey. There must be a liberal application of time, energy and capital to this problem, and, above all, some official consideration of the marketing problem, without which, even with the gift of the soil, the pioneering planters can never hope to succeed in their aim of Americanizing the production of sugar."

Meanwhile, if there are those who wish to follow in Miss Fisher's footsteps, without the same scientific interest in reclaiming the soil for the sweet tooth of the coming generation, it might be added that Albert Haring, a junior at Yale who accompanied the party on the boat across Lake Okeechobee, put in half an hour with a fishing rod one day and landed eight catfish, four of them weighing six pounds.

Jewish Waif May Inherit the Fels Millions

A RAGGED waif, now starving in the gutters of Jerusalem, may soon become the heir to the Fels millions.

Mrs. Joseph Fels, widow of the soap king and philanthropist, is on her way to Palestine. When she returns she expects to bring back with her one of the Palestinian war orphans as her legally adopted foster child.

Mrs. Fels, head of the single tax movement, is also an ardent Zionist, and has been one of the most prominent figures working to fulfill the dream which has endured through centuries—Zion restored.

"If I should adopt one of the Palestine orphans," Mrs. Fels explained, "it would be like taking into my heart and home the cause of Zionism itself.

"I can foresee that the Palestinian orphans will be particularly tempting to me, for they are not only reared in the atmosphere of the Jewish home but of the Jewish homeland as well. And then," she added with a smile, "I hear that they're such fine children."

Mrs. Fels is journeying to Palestine to study the needs there at close range so that she may "give more intelligently." The war orphan problem is the most vital of all, she declared, and will consequently receive the greater part of her attention. For this reason she has pledged her coöperation with the war orphans department of the Joint Distribution Committee, which is opening its all-year-round campaign in behalf of the starving Jewish children of Europe.

"There is no telling what I may do and what I may give when I am face to face with these suffering little ones," she continued. "Although I could only really adopt one, I will help the others financially. That's the only good of having anything, you know, to give it away."

There are 4,000 fatherless and motherless candidates for the Fels millions in the files of the war orphans department. These Palestinian orphans are greatly in the minority, for the total number of Jewish orphans in Europe runs into 150,000. Although the Polish children are equally appealing, those from the homeland are the more picturesque.

It would be hard to find a history, for instance, which could surpass in "heart interest" and "atmosphere" that of Tswie Hakawy, who is a "waker-up" of the rabbis, and who is one of the potential heirs of Mrs. Fels.

The foreign investigator for the Joint Distribution Committee has attached the following record to Tswie's photograph:

"Tswie is one of our nicest orphans. He has a very sad story. His father died of typhus—a victim of the hardships he had endured during the war, and the mother and eldest sister died of meningitis. The remaining sister died this year.

"Tswie lives with his old grandmother, together with his little cousin, Pesha Gross, whose father was killed in the recent pogrom in Jerusalem, and whose mother also died of meningitis. The grandmother is very poor and cannot provide for the children.

"Every morning these two little cousins (Tswie is eight and Pesha is seven) go to the synagogues to say Kadish. Tswie also acts as waker-up of all the rabbis and other pious notables in the district, arousing them when it is time to go to pray. His father used to perform this duty, and he carries on the tradition.

"Tswie attends an orthodox school, where he is one of the ablest pupils. He is a source of constant delight to our home visitor, for his quaint old-young manner endears him to all who meet him."

The files in the war orphans department are brimming with just such histories attached to wistful child faces, and the investigators for the committee are collecting more every day. These children are being offered "for sale" at $100 each, under the "financial adoption" plan. When an individual, family or group buys an orphan at that price they become its guardian for one year, the child is placed in a normal home, supplied with sufficient food and clothing, and is put in communication with those who have thus bought off grim old starvation.

The war orphans department is, of course, far more concerned with the financial adoption of its thousands of needy little ones than with the legal adoption of a single child by Mrs. Fels. When the purchase price of an orphan is sent into the office there is great rejoicing, and the orphan rescued or "bought" is selected with care. For it is hard to choose one from out of so many pleading faces. There are children who were orphaned in pogroms, and children who saw their fathers and mothers die from privation, as refugees on the roadside, as well as the thousands of children who were left alone in the world through the war.

But which would the Fels heir be—a boy or a girl? Mrs. Fels was asked.

"It would make no difference," she replied with a smile. "No," she mused, gazing before her thoughtfully, as if looking into the future and picturing a manly young son as compared with a gentle young daughter, "I am sure it would make no difference."

MRS. JOSEPH FELS, who is on her way to Palestine and will adopt a Jewish child while there